



HIKING - FOREST SERVICE - ROCKY MOUNTAIN REGION UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

NATIONAL FOREST – San Juan RANGER DISTRICT - Columbine
Updated: May, 2003

Needle Creek/Chicago Basin to Johnson Creek over Columbine Pass #504

Length: 17 mi / 27.4 km

Use: Heavy use in some areas

Difficulty: Strenuous

USGS Map (s):

Vallecito Reservoir,
Granite Peak, Emerald Lake, Granite Lake

Starting Elevation: 8,000'

Needleton

Ending Elevation: 9,000'

Junction of Johnson Creek Trail and Vallecito
Vallecito Creek Trail

Highest Elevation: 12,680' at Columbine Pass

Access # 1:

11-mile hike in on Purgatory Trail #511 that takes
approx. 5 hours. Trailhead can be reached via Colorado
Highway #550, with parking at the trailhead across from
Durango Mountain Resort's
main entrance.

Access # 2:

Ride in on the Durango-
Silverton Narrow Gauge
Railroad. NOTE that on an
average summer day, 50 people
will disembark from the train to
head to Chicago Basin—a
beautiful, but crowded,
backpacking destination.

**Attractions &
Considerations:**

The Needle Creek Trail follows
the creek until it reaches the
lower end of Chicago Basin,
about 5 miles up the trail.
There are no camping spots
until you reach Chicago Basin.
*There is a permanent fire ban
for Needle Creek and all of its
headwaters.* At 6.5 miles you
begin the steep climb to
Columbine Pass. There are
switchbacks for the next 2
miles and an ascent of 1,500
feet. From the top of Columbine
Pass you descend 680 feet in
0.4 mile to Columbine Lake.
From the lake the hike is easy
to moderate terrain to the
junction of the Vallecito Creek
Trail at mile 17.

The alpine meadows are full of
blooming wildflowers in late
July and August. This area
has excellent views and
photographic possibilities.
Water can be found off the
trail in most of the tributaries,
but due to Giardia it should be
filtered. As with all high-
altitude areas, storms can
move in rapidly, bringing
severe wind, lightning, rain,
snow, or hail at any time of
the year. Plan accordingly.

Fishing Considerations:

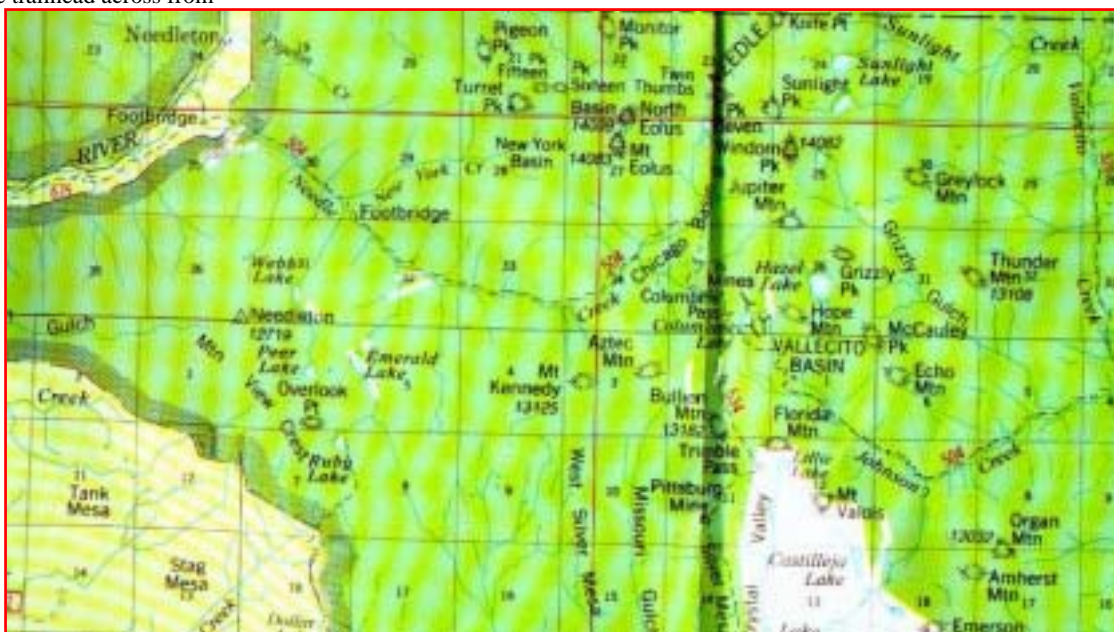
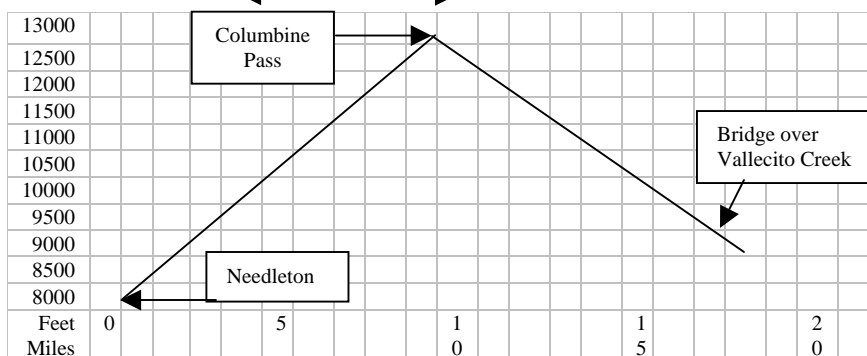
Fishing is good on Johnson
Creek, but the area is crowded
with hikers from Columbine
Pass. Columbine Lake, at
12,370 feet, is rated fair for
cutthroat and brook. Between
the Weminuche Wilderness
and the Vallecito Reservoir,
the river offers some of the
finest fly-fishing found
anywhere. The trout in the
Wilderness are wild fish. They
include rainbows, brookies,
browns, and cutthroats. Please
check the fishing regulations
regarding limits, allowable
lures, and restrictions on
certain lakes, rivers, etc.

Weminuche Wilderness Regulations:

- Group size is limited to 15 people.
- In the area surrounding Emerald Lake and Little Emerald Lake, camping, campfires, grazing, and restraining stock are not allowed, except in designated sites.
- Camping is not allowed within 100 feet of any water source.
- Outfitter-guides who receive any form of compensation must obtain a special-use permit to operate on public land.
- Possession of motorized equipment and mechanized means of transport are not permitted.
- Recreational livestock are prohibited from being restrained within 100 feet of lakeshores and streams or within riparian areas.

Recommended Season

Spring Summer Fall Winter



Scan of the San Juan National Forest Map

Forest Service maps and other publications are available at the
Public Lands Center, in the Durango Tech Center, ½ mile west
of Durango off Highway 160, or by calling (970) 247-4874.
www.sjma.org